The Anchor That Any Man Could Forge

Ahmad Shah Durrani, the Blessing Too Weak to Bear Weight, and the Empire That Could Not Outlive Its Plunder, 1747–1772

THE ANCHOR THAT ANY MAN COULD FORGE
PREFACE

Preface: the collaboration, and what this study is for

On how the work was made, the question it asks, and the discipline it is held in.

This study is part of the Patterns of Power series and, like the others, it is a collaboration. The research direction, the case selection, and the judgement are the author's; the historical synthesis, the drafting, and much of the scholarly retrieval were done with Claude, Anthropic's model, each claim checked against the record before the next was begun. The method is stated openly because it is an emerging form of knowledge production and ought to be visible rather than concealed, and because a reader is entitled to know how a thing was built before deciding what to make of it.

This study has an unusual parentage worth naming. It is rebuilt from the earliest and most primitive draft in the whole corpus — a long study written before this series had any settled framework at all, at the moment its author first suspected that *belief* was doing something load-bearing in the durability of empires but had not yet found the vocabulary to say what. That draft called itself "the counterfactual of power without belief," and its instinct was sound: it had found a conqueror of the first rank whose empire dissolved within a generation of his death, and it was certain the missing ingredient was something other than force. But lacking the framework, it could only name the absence — no belief, no institutions, no interpretive class — without explaining the mechanism, and it treated "belief" as a single missing thing rather than as the several distinct structural functions this series has since learned to separate. This study keeps that draft's factual spine and its founding intuition, and replaces its blunt vocabulary with the sharper one the series has built.

It is a counter-study, the second in the series, and it is designed to sit beside the first. Where the Wallenstein study examines a man who built *no anchor at all*, this

one examines a man who built *an anchor too weak to hold* — and the two cases together bracket the negative space around every successful order, showing from two directions what the durable cases had that these lacked. The framework is stated in full below; no prior reading is required. It is held as tested, not revealed. This case largely confirms the framework and strains it in one honest place, treated in the closing sections. To explain why an empire failed to cohere is not to lament that a more effective conquest state was not built over the peoples it plundered; Ahmad Shah's army sacked Delhi and left tens of thousands dead, and the "plunder economy" this study analyses structurally was, on the ground, the systematic robbery of the living.

THE ANCHOR THAT ANY MAN COULD FORGE
SECTION ONE

The puzzle

A conqueror the equal of Timur built an empire in twenty-five years, and it was gone in a generation.

By the ordinary measures of military achievement, Ahmad Shah Durrani belongs in the first rank of the world's conquerors. In the twenty-five years between his elevation in 1747 and his death in 1772, he built an empire that stretched from eastern Iran across present-day Afghanistan and Pakistan into northern India — from the Amu Darya to the Arabian Sea, from Mashhad to Delhi. He invaded India repeatedly and at will. In 1761, at Panipat north of Delhi, he destroyed the army of the Maratha Confederacy — the rising Hindu power that had been dismantling the Mughal Empire — in one of the largest and bloodiest battles of the eighteenth century, a defeat so total it broke Maratha expansion for a decade. He commanded the loyalty of the fierce Pashtun tribes, defeated Persians, Mughals, Marathas, and Sikhs in turn, and accumulated a treasure that included the Koh-i-Noor diamond. In scope and speed his conquests bear comparison with those of Timur or Genghis Khan, and he is remembered, not without reason, as the founder of modern Afghanistan.

And within a generation of his death, essentially all of it was gone. His sons fell to quarrelling almost immediately; his chosen heir, Timur Shah, held the core together for a time, but after Timur's death in 1793 the empire fractured among grandsons and rival princes into open civil war. The Indian conquests fell away, the Persian marches fell away, the great treasure dissipated into the fighting, and by 1800 the "Durrani Empire" was a name laid over a scatter of autonomous chieftaincies bound by little more than a shared tribal identity and a habit of fighting one another. By 1818 the Durrani (Sadozai) line had effectively lost power to a rival clan; the dynasty limped on in fragments until the middle of the nineteenth century. The empire did not shrink or decline so much as *evaporate*, and it evaporated along the exact lines —

tribe against tribe, son against son — that its founder had spent his life papering over.

Here is the puzzle. Set Ahmad Shah beside the founders this series has studied whose orders lasted centuries — the Ethiopian Solomonids, the Ottoman house, the Mughals he humbled at Panipat. He was not their inferior as a soldier; several of them were his inferior. He conquered as much, as fast, and held the loyalty of as ferocious a following. Why did their orders outlive their founders by three hundred years and his outlive him by barely twenty? What did the men who built lasting empires possess that this supreme conqueror did not — and why could all his victories, all his plunder, and all the personal devotion of the tribes not buy it? The draft that this study rebuilds was sure the answer was "belief." It was close. The answer is more precise, and it turns on a single sheaf of barley placed in a young man's turban on an October day in Kandahar.

THE ANCHOR THAT ANY MAN COULD FORGE
SECTION TWO

The framework, for a reader who has not met it

Possession against ownership, the anchor and its four properties, sole authorship, and the succession trap.

Begin with a distinction this case makes vivid. **Possession** is a present-tense physical relation: what force holds right now. **Ownership** is a claim about the future and about other people — that a holding persists across the holder's absence and death, honoured by others not from fear at that instant but from acceptance of a right. Ownership is a structure of expectations about how others will behave across time, and force, sovereign over the present, cannot by itself reach it. A conqueror holds his conquests as possession. To convert them into ownership — into an order that survives him and passes to an heir — he needs something force alone cannot supply.

That something is an **anchor**: a shared source of legitimate title, from which every holding in the order draws its rightfulness, and which is placed beyond the reach of the men competing for power. The anchor works by a coordination mechanism. If every man's standing derives from one source none of them can seize, then a grab at any holding is an attack on the ground beneath all of them, and the other holders unite against the aggressor not from loyalty but because letting the grab stand would unmake their own titles. The anchor turns rivals into an automatic coalition, and so the settlement holds.

A working anchor has four properties, and this case turns on the fourth. It must be **determinate** (yielding one answer to who rightfully holds and who succeeds), **common knowledge** (every man knowing every man recognises it), **attached to an office rather than a person** (so it survives a death), and — decisively here — **unforgeable by the men competing for power**. This last is the crux. If any of the

competitors can *produce* the source of legitimacy — can convene it, embody it, or counterfeit it — then it is not an anchor at all, because it collapses back into the current balance of force among them. The strongest anchors place their author beyond every competitor's reach: a god no one can command, a bloodline no one can forge, a closed sacred text no one can rewrite, an impersonal procedure no one can capture. A source of title that the players themselves can generate is only their present strength wearing a ceremony.

Two further pieces this case requires. First, the **sole-authorship condition**: a settlement holds only if the title of the armed men traces to a *single* source. Where title instead flows *through* intermediate power-holders — where a chief's followers are loyal to the chief, who is loyal to the paramount — no single anchor authors the whole, and the structure is one of nested personal loyalties that fragments the instant the paramount's grip loosens. This series has seen the disease in medieval European subinfeudation and the cure in devices like the Salisbury Oath, which clawed every man's ultimate allegiance up to one crown. Second, the **succession trap**: even a real anchor destroys the order it holds if it fails to yield *one determinate answer* to who rules next. An anchor that legitimates a man but not a rule of succession converts every death into a war.

The counterfactual method of this study is to take a conqueror who had force in abundance and ask which of these he built and which he did not — and to read his empire's rapid death as the diagnostic readout of the specific pieces that were missing.

THE ANCHOR THAT ANY MAN COULD FORGE
SECTION THREE

The historical spine

What happened, for a reader who knows nothing of eighteenth-century Afghanistan.

The story begins in the wreckage of two empires. For two centuries the lands between India and Iran had been divided between the **Mughal Empire**, the great Muslim power of the Indian subcontinent, and **Safavid Persia** to its west. By the early eighteenth century both were failing. The Safavids collapsed in 1722; out of the chaos rose **Nader Shah**, a military adventurer of genius who seized Persia, and in 1739 swept into India, sacked Delhi in a massacre that broke Mughal power for good, and carried off its treasure — including the Peacock Throne and the Koh-i-Noor diamond. In Nader Shah's army rose a young Pashtun cavalry commander of the **Abdali** tribal confederation named Ahmad Khan.

In June 1747 Nader Shah was murdered by his own officers, and his empire dissolved. Ahmad Khan, commanding his Abdali horsemen and holding a share of Nader's treasury, withdrew eastward to **Kandahar**, in the Pashtun heartland. There, in a **loya jirga** — a grand tribal council — the chiefs of the Abdali tribes met to choose a leader. Pashtun society was **segmentary**: organised into tribes, sub-tribes, clans, and lineages, each with its own leadership and autonomy, unified only against external threat and given to constant feuding otherwise, and bound by a fierce honour code, *Pashtunwali*. The jirga was its instrument of collective decision. After days of deliberation among several candidates, a Sufi holy man named **Sabir Shah** emerged and declared Ahmad Khan the worthiest; the council agreed, and the holy man placed a sheaf of barley or wheat in the young man's turban as a crown. Ahmad Khan — now **Ahmad Shah**, taking the title *Durr-i-Durran*, "pearl of pearls," from which his people became the **Durrani** — was paramount not by birthright and not by his own proclamation but by tribal election ratified by a saint's blessing.

From this base he conquered with astonishing speed. He took Kabul and Ghazni, then Herat, then drove east into India again and again — nine invasions across his

reign — extracting tribute and plunder from the Punjab and the crumbling Mughal lands. His empire's economy was built on this: not a settled system of taxation over the conquered territories, but the recurring extraction of **plunder** and tribute by the mobile tribal army, distributed to the chiefs and their men. The high point was **Panipat, 1761**, where he shattered the Marathas. But the same years saw the rise of a resistance he could never master: the **Sikhs** of the Punjab, whose guerrilla bands harried his lines of communication and reconquered the province almost as fast as he could sweep through it, so that his Indian empire was in practice ungovernable and had to be re-invaded rather than ruled.

Ahmad Shah died in 1772 of a long illness. He had named his son **Timur Shah** as heir, passing over an elder son, and Timur — moving his capital to Kabul, away from the Kandahar tribal heartland, precisely to escape the chiefs' grip — held the core together until his own death in 1793. Thereafter it came apart. Timur left many sons and no clear successor; they fought. The empire fragmented among Ahmad Shah's grandsons into civil war, the outlying conquests fell away, and by the 1820s power had passed from the Sadozai line of the Durranis to a rival clan, the **Barakzai**. The empire that had reached from Mashhad to Delhi in the founder's lifetime was, two generations after him, a memory contested among warlords.

THE ANCHOR THAT ANY MAN COULD FORGE
SECTION FOUR

The blessing too weak to bear weight

The anchor Ahmad Shah did reach for — and why it could not hold.

The draft this study rebuilds made a revealing error. It treated Ahmad Shah as a man with *no* legitimating apparatus at all — pure force and tribal loyalty, "power without belief." But look again at that October day in Kandahar, at the detail the draft recorded without grasping: *a Sufi holy man placed a sheaf in his turban and declared him chosen by God.* That is not the absence of an anchor. That is a man reaching for one.

Ahmad Shah did not crown himself. Self-coronation is the move this series calls the Diocletian error — the ruler declaring his own sacrality, which fails because a legitimacy a man confers on himself is revisable by that man and visible as such to everyone. Ahmad Shah avoided it. He took his legitimation from *outside himself*: from the tribal consensus of the jirga, and from the blessing of Sabir Shah, a holy man whose sanctity Ahmad Shah did not control and could not counterfeit. Structurally this is the correct instinct — the same instinct that led Constantine to submit to a God he could not command and Charlemagne to travel to Rome for the Pope's hands on his head. Ahmad Shah understood, at least in the moment of his elevation, that rightful rule must be conferred by a source beyond the ruler. He reached for an anchor.

But he reached for one too weak to bear the weight of an empire, and the weakness is precisely diagnosable against the four properties. Test the tribal-elective-plus-saintly-blessing anchor:

It was **not determinate** in the one place that mattered most, succession — of which more below.

It was, for a moment, **common knowledge** — the assembled chiefs all saw the blessing and the election, which is exactly what such ceremonies manufacture.

But it was **not attached to an office**. The blessing fell on *Ahmad Khan the man* — the worthiest candidate, the ablest warrior — not on a durable kingship that would pass its sanctity to a successor. A saint's endorsement of a person is not the creation of a throne. When the person died, the blessing died with him; there was no office of "Durrani king" that carried an independent, transferable legitimacy the way the Solomonic crown or the Ottoman sultanate did.

And decisively, it was **forgeable by the competitors** — indeed it was *made of* the competitors. This is the heart of the case. The jirga is not a source of title placed beyond the reach of the men competing for power; the jirga *is* those men, assembled. Any sufficiently powerful chief could convene a council; the tribal-elective anchor therefore could not do the one thing an anchor must do, which is sit outside the contest and bind it. It was the contest, formalised. Compare the Venetian lottery, engineered so that no faction could capture the electing body: the whole point of that anchor was that the competitors could *not* produce its outcome. The jirga is the exact opposite — its outcome is nothing but the current balance of tribal force, ratified. A holy man's blessing might have supplied the missing exogeneity, and for one man on one day it did; but a single saint blessing a single candidate is a thin and personal thing, not a standing institution like an anointing church or a closed canon that could authorise a line of kings across generations. Ahmad Shah grabbed the nearest available source of exogenous legitimacy — a respected dervish — and it was enough to crown him and nothing like enough to found a dynasty.

So this is not Wallenstein, who built no anchor and whose army's loyalty was pinned to a rival authority that flipped it in a night. Ahmad Shah built a *real* anchor, and it did real work: it made him, unmistakably and by more than force, the paramount — which is why the coalition held together through a quarter-century of conquest where a pure warlord's would have splintered. But it was an anchor with a fatal ceiling. It could legitimate a man against external enemies. It could not author an order that outlived him, because it was attached to his person, and because its "external" source was too weak and too personal to transfer.

THE ANCHOR THAT ANY MAN COULD FORGE
SECTION FIVE

The paramount who could distribute plunder but not author title

Sole authorship, and why the segmentary structure could never be welded into one.

The deeper failure lies in the sole-authorship condition, and here the case is a cleaner instance than the draft could see, because the draft lacked the concept.

Recall the condition: a settlement holds only if the armed men's title traces to a *single* source. Where title flows *through* intermediate power-holders instead, the structure is nested personal loyalties that fragment the moment the top loosens. Pashtun segmentary tribalism is this condition in its purest form — a permanent, native, structural version of the subinfeudation that afflicted medieval Europe. A tribal chief's men followed *the chief*. The chief followed the paramount. But the men did not follow the paramount; their loyalty ran to their own khan, and through him, conditionally, upward. Ahmad Shah sat at the apex of a pyramid of personal loyalties he did not author. He was paramount over the chiefs; he was not the source of the chiefs' hold over their own followers.

And crucially, he never did the thing a founder does to fix this — never clawed authorship upward to himself, as William the Conqueror did with the Salisbury Oath, binding every under-tenant's ultimate allegiance directly to the crown over the heads of their lords. Ahmad Shah could not have done it even had he conceived it, because the jirga that made him would never have permitted the paramount to dissolve the tribes' internal authority; his own legitimacy flowed *from* that tribal structure, so he could not overturn it without sawing off the branch he sat on. The very thing that elevated him forbade him to consolidate. This is the trap of the forgeable anchor closing from the other side: because his title came from the

assembled competitors, he could never author *their* titles, and so sole authorship was structurally out of reach.

What he had instead of authored title was **plunder**, and the framework lets us read the famous "plunder economy" of the draft with precision it lacked. Ahmad Shah bound the chiefs to him not by making their holdings flow from him — he could not — but by *distributing booty*: the loot of India, the tribute of the Punjab, the treasure of Delhi, shared out to the khans and their men. This is exactly what a paramount does when he cannot author title. Land granted as heritable title, flowing from a single crown, binds a man's descendants to the source across generations and makes rebellion an attack on the ground beneath all title — that is an anchor's work. Plunder distributed binds a man only until the next distribution, and binds his loyalty to the *flow of booty*, not to the source. It is possession handed out, not ownership conferred. The draft called this a "plunder trap" and diagnosed it as economic — the empire needed constant war to fund itself and could not transition to stable taxation. That is true but shallow. The deep reason is structural: plunder is what you distribute *because you have no anchor to make grants stick*. The chiefs took booty and remained loyal to their own lineages; nothing Ahmad Shah gave them ever became *his* title in their hands, because he was never the author of title. And so the moment the conquest slowed — the moment the flow of plunder faltered against Sikh resistance and the exhaustion of India — a paramount who had only ever distributed booty had nothing left with which to bind anyone. The "death spiral" the draft identified is real, but it is the symptom. The disease is authorlessness.

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SECTION SIX

The succession that had no rule

The determinacy failure, and the war built into the founding.

The final piece is the succession trap, and it is where the forgeable anchor delivered its bill in full.

A durable order's anchor yields one determinate answer to who rules next. The Ottoman house, however bloody its practice, had a clear principle that the sultanate passed within one lineage; the Solomonic crown of Ethiopia passed by a bloodline no one could forge. These rules converted the death of a ruler into a transfer rather than a war — not always peacefully, but determinately, because everyone knew where legitimacy would land next and could coordinate on it in advance.

Ahmad Shah's anchor had no such rule, because it was elective and personal. The jirga chose *the worthiest*; but "the worthiest" is not a succession rule, it is an invitation to a contest, because every ambitious son and chief can claim to be worthiest and no determinate principle adjudicates between them. Ahmad Shah tried to impose determinacy by simply *naming* Timur Shah his heir, passing over an elder son — an attempt to convert his elective, personal legitimacy into a hereditary rule by fiat. But a founder cannot single-handedly manufacture a succession principle by naming an heir, any more than he can manufacture an anchor by proclaiming his own sanctity; the principle has to be one the competitors cannot revise, and a dead father's preference is exactly the kind of thing ambitious sons revise. Timur held on — significantly, by *fleeing the tribal heartland*, moving his capital to Kabul to escape the Kandahar chiefs whose jirga could unmake him, which is itself the confession that the founding anchor was a threat to any settled succession. But Timur in turn left many sons and no rule, and at his death the thing the elective anchor had always contained — a war among the worthy — arrived in full. The empire fragmented among grandsons because it had been built, from the first day in Kandahar, on a

source of legitimacy that could crown a man but could never determinately name his successor. The war was not a failure of the system. It was the system, arriving on schedule.

So Ahmad Shah's empire failed by two of the framework's routes at once, and the combination is what makes it a distinct counter-case rather than a repeat of Wallenstein. It failed by the **multi-author route** — a segmentary structure of nested personal loyalties that was never welded into single authorship, so that the paramount distributed plunder because he could not confer title — and it failed by the **succession route** — an elective, personal anchor that yielded no determinate rule for who ruled next, so that every death was a war. Wallenstein failed because he had no anchor and his borrowed loyalty flipped. Ahmad Shah failed because his anchor, though real, was forgeable, person-attached, and succession-blind. Two different holes in the same wall.

THE ANCHOR THAT ANY MAN COULD FORGE
SECTION SEVEN

What the case shows, and where it strains

The framework confirmed from the negative side — and the honest complication.

What it shows. Ahmad Shah Durrani sharpens the series' central claim by supplying its subtlest negative instance. The Wallenstein study proved that *no* anchor means instant, successor-less collapse. This study proves something finer: that an anchor which is *real but too weak* — forgeable by the competitors, attached to a person rather than an office, silent on succession — produces not instant collapse but exactly what the historical record shows, an empire that coheres brilliantly under its founder and dissolves within a generation of his death along the fault lines the anchor failed to close. It confirms the sole-authorship condition by showing a paramount who could never author title and so distributed plunder instead, and whose economy's fragility was the *symptom* of that authorlessness rather than an independent cause. It confirms the succession-determinacy requirement by showing an elective anchor that built a war of succession into its own founding. And it vindicates the founding intuition of the draft — that belief and legitimacy are load-bearing — while correcting its vocabulary: the missing thing was not "belief" as a single substance but the several distinct structural properties an anchor must have, of which Ahmad Shah's blessing supplied one or two and lacked the rest.

Above all, the case answers the puzzle. Ahmad Shah was the equal of the great founders as a conqueror and their inferior in exactly one respect: they inherited or built anchors that were unforgeable, office-attached, and succession-determinate, and he built one that was none of these. That single difference, invisible while the founder lived and his armies won, is the whole of why their orders lasted three

centuries and his lasted twenty years. Force built all of it; the missing anchor unbuilt all of it the moment force paused.

Where it strains. Two honest complications. First, the "too weak an anchor" reading, like the "pure force" reading of Wallenstein, is somewhat too clean, and for a symmetrical reason. Ahmad Shah's failure was overdetermined. The relentless Sikh resistance in the Punjab, the sheer geographic extension of an empire crossing deserts and mountains with pre-modern communications, the exhaustion of an India that had already been stripped by Nader Shah, and the specific bad luck of his long final illness all contributed to the empire's fragility independently of any anchor analysis. A framework that reads the collapse purely as anchor-failure flatters itself; the structural diagnosis explains why the empire could not *cohere*, but the timing and speed of its dissolution owed much to contingencies the framework does not touch. The claim is that the missing anchor made fragmentation *structural and inevitable in the long run*, not that it was the sole proximate cause of every reverse.

Second, and more interesting, the case pressures the framework's account of what an anchor is *for*. Ahmad Shah's tribal-elective legitimacy, weak as it was for founding a dynasty, was genuinely *strong* at doing something the framework has undervalued: rapidly assembling a fractious, feuding, segmentary society into a unified force against external enemies. The jirga and the honour code could bind the tribes for a campaign of conquest precisely *because* the anchor was internal to them and drew on their own consensus. The framework, built to explain durable *internal* settlement, tends to score the forgeable anchor as simply deficient. But this case suggests that different anchors are optimised for different jobs — that a source of legitimacy which is useless for founding a transferable dynasty may be excellent for mobilising a coalition — and that "strength" and "weakness" in an anchor are not scalar but depend on the task. The framework should register this: Ahmad Shah's anchor was not merely a *failed* version of the Solomonic crown; it was a *different instrument*, superb at the thing it did and incapable of the thing it did not, and the series has not fully theorised that a society might possess a mobilising anchor without a dynastic one.

THE ANCHOR THAT ANY MAN COULD FORGE
SECTION EIGHT

The disciplines: what this analysis must not flatten

Four cautions.

The Sabir Shah blessing may be legend, and the argument must not lean on its literal truth. The story of the holy man and the sheaf is recorded in the traditional sources and may well have been elaborated or invented after the fact to dignify the founding. The structural point survives either way — indeed it survives *better* if the story is a later invention, because an invented sanctification is itself evidence that the Durrani state felt the need for an exogenous anchor and reached for the nearest one to hand. But the reader should not take the wheat-sheaf as verified fact; it is treated here as revealing of the state's legitimating instinct, whether it happened as told or not.

"Weak anchor" is a structural judgement, not a cultural one, and carries no verdict on Pashtun society. To say the tribal-elective anchor could not found a transferable dynasty is a claim about a specific structural function, not a claim that segmentary tribal organisation is primitive or that the jirga is an inferior institution. The jirga was, and is, a sophisticated instrument of collective decision superbly adapted to its society's needs; it simply is not, and was never meant to be, a machine for manufacturing the unforgeable, office-attached, succession-determinate authority that founds a multigenerational empire. The mismatch is between an instrument and a task, not a hierarchy of civilisations. The successful founders this series studies were not better peoples than the Pashtuns; several ruled far crueller orders. They had inherited anchors suited to dynasty-founding. Ahmad Shah had not.

The counter-example proves necessity, not sufficiency. That Ahmad Shah's empire fragmented for lack of a strong anchor shows a strong anchor is *necessary* for

durable order; it does not show that had he somehow acquired one — a forged descent from the Prophet, say, or a captured interpretive clergy — the empire would certainly have lasted. Dynasty-founding is rare and hard and depends on much this case does not touch. The case shows what the absence of a durable anchor guarantees. It does not show that its presence would have sufficed against the Sikhs, the distances, and the exhausted treasury.

And legibility is not pardon — here pointed at the conquest. This study has analysed the "plunder economy" with a certain structural detachment, as the mechanism by which an authorless paramount bound his chiefs. That mechanism was, in fact, the organised robbery of living people across a subcontinent: the sack of Delhi and other cities, the stripping of the Punjab, the deaths of tens of thousands at Panipat and in the raids. To explain that plunder was structurally necessary to a state without an anchor is in no way to soften what the plunder was. A Durrani Empire that had possessed a strong anchor and transitioned to stable taxation would have been a more durable extraction machine, not a gentler one — and the peoples under it would have been permanently taxed rather than periodically robbed, which is not obviously a mercy. The framework explains the empire's fragility; it passes no judgement that a more durable version would have been better for anyone but its rulers.

THE ANCHOR THAT ANY MAN COULD FORGE
CONCLUSION

Conclusion: the pearl of pearls, and the crown of straw

Returning to the puzzle.

The puzzle was why a conqueror the equal of Timur — who took an empire from Mashhad to Delhi in twenty-five years and broke the Marathas at Panipat — founded an order that dissolved within a generation of his death, when lesser soldiers founded dynasties that lasted three hundred years.

The answer is that Ahmad Shah won everything force can win and reached, at the founding, for the one thing force cannot supply — and grabbed a version of it too weak to bear the weight of what he built. He did not make the warlord's mistake of crowning himself; he took his legitimacy from outside, from the consensus of the jirga and the blessing of a holy man, and that real if fragile anchor did real work, binding the feuding tribes into a coalition that conquered a subcontinent. But the anchor he reached for was forgeable, because it was made of the very chiefs it was meant to bind; it was attached to his person rather than to a durable office, so it died when he died; and it yielded no determinate rule of succession, so it wrote a war among his heirs into the founding. He could distribute plunder but never author title, because his own legitimacy flowed up from the tribes and forbade him to author theirs — and so he bound his chiefs to the flow of booty rather than to a source, which held brilliantly while the conquests flowed and evaporated the moment they stopped.

That is the counterfactual this case supplies, and it is the sharper sibling of the Wallenstein study. Wallenstein had no anchor, and his borrowed loyalty flipped in a night. Ahmad Shah had an anchor, and it was a crown of straw — a sheaf of barley in a turban, a saint's blessing on a man, a council of the very rivals it was meant to bind. It was enough to make a pearl of pearls. It was nothing like enough to make a throne

that could outlive him. And so the deepest lesson of this series is confirmed once more from its hardest angle: force is the power of the present tense, and legitimacy the power of the future tense, but not all legitimacy is equal — an anchor must be unforgeable, and office-bound, and determinate about succession, or it will crown a conqueror and bury an empire in the same generation. Ahmad Shah Durrani built one of the eighteenth century's greatest empires on a crown of straw, and when the man who wore it died, the straw scattered on the wind that had carried his armies to Delhi.

A note on sources and scholarship

What this rests on, what is standard, and what is contested.

The framework. The theory applied here — possession against ownership, the anchor and its four properties, the sole-authorship condition, and the succession-determinacy requirement — is developed in the companion papers of this series and applied here rather than argued from scratch. Its borrowed components include Jeremy Bentham on property as secured expectation, Max Weber on legitimate authority, Thomas Schelling on coordination and focal points, Michael Chwe on public ceremony and common knowledge, and Ibn Khaldun on the cohesive solidarity (*asabiyya*) of tribal societies and its characteristic decay across generations — a classical account with which this study's reading of the segmentary structure is in obvious sympathy. The reading of Ahmad Shah as the "weak anchor" counterfactual — sibling to the "no anchor" Wallenstein case — is this study's application.

The historical spine. The collapse of Safavid Persia (1722) and the career of Nader Shah, including the sack of Delhi (1739) and the capture of the Mughal treasure; Ahmad Khan's service as an Abdali cavalry commander under Nader; Nader's assassination (1747) and Ahmad Khan's withdrawal to Kandahar with a share of the treasury including the Koh-i-Noor; the loya jirga election of 1747, the intervention of the Sufi Sabir Shah, the sheaf placed in the turban, and the assumption of the title *Durr-i-Durran*; the conquests across Afghanistan, eastern Persia, and northern India; the repeated Indian invasions and the victory over the Marathas at Panipat (1761); the persistent Sikh resistance in the Punjab; the plunder-and-tribute basis of the imperial economy and the absence of a settled taxation system; Ahmad Shah's death (1772), his designation of Timur Shah over an elder son, Timur's move of the capital to Kabul, and the fragmentation of the empire after Timur's death (1793) into civil war among Ahmad Shah's descendants, with the

eventual passage of power from the Sadozai Durranis to the Barakzai in the early nineteenth century — all follow the standard record. The dates of Ahmad Shah's elevation are given variously as July and October 1747 in the sources (the jirga and the formal coronation may account for the two); this study notes the discrepancy rather than resolving it. Standard treatments include the histories of Afghanistan and the Durrani Empire and the biographical scholarship on Ahmad Shah; the Panipat campaign and the Maratha conflict are covered in the historiography of eighteenth-century India; Michael Axworthy's work on Nader Shah supplies the Persian background.

Contested and interpretive. The historicity of the Sabir Shah blessing is uncertain and is treated here as revealing of the state's legitimating instinct regardless of its literal truth, as noted in the disciplines. The origin of the *Durr-i-Durran* title (whether from a dream, from the pearl earrings of Nader Shah's guard, or otherwise) is variously reported and is not load-bearing here. The central analytical claims — that Ahmad Shah's tribal-elective-plus-saintly legitimacy constituted a *real but forgeable and person-attached anchor* rather than the mere *absence* of legitimacy the parent draft described; that his failure ran through the sole-authorship and succession-determinacy conditions specifically; that the "plunder economy" was the symptom of authorlessness rather than an independent cause; and that his anchor was a *different instrument* optimised for mobilisation rather than a merely deficient version of a dynastic one — are this framework's interpretations, offered in its own terms and testable against the record, not settled historical consensus. The section on where the case strains registers honestly that the collapse was overdetermined by Sikh resistance, geography, and a stripped Indian economy, and that the framework explains the empire's structural incoherence better than the precise timing of its fall.

On what is not attempted. This study makes no claim to original historical research. It is an analytical synthesis applying a structural framework to an established record, rebuilt from the earliest draft in the corpus, and its contribution, if any, lies in reading Ahmad Shah Durrani not as a man of "power without belief" but as a man who built a *real anchor too weak to hold* — forgeable because made of the competitors, person-attached rather than office-bound, and silent on succession — and whose empire's rapid dissolution is the diagnostic readout of exactly those three deficiencies. Where the framework and the record disagree, the record wins,

and the section on where the case strains is the part its author considers most worth keeping.